

The shameless ones

What some contemporary heroes of culture and politics have in common is not contempt for the law, but contempt for guilt

Eran Rolnik

Eating guilt. In 1890, Haim Nahman Bialik wrote a short poem that has two titles: "Eating Guilt" and "The Penitent." The poem describes how, on the eve of Yom Kippur, as part of the holiday's Kappara ritual, the author waved a white fowl above his head as a mark of atonement and exculpated his heart of iniquity. After the fast, delighting in the chicken thighs he'd prepared for himself, he realized that he'd devoured "the fowl of his atonements, the meat of his abominations," and that all his sins and transgressions had transmigrated back to his body.

Literary commentators read Bialik's poem as a critical satire of Hasidism, though one can also see the colorful image of a Jew who takes pleasure in the guilt feelings he has just tried to rid himself of, as a metaphor for the complex relations that human beings have with guilt feelings all year round.

The patient broke down. "Six million – can you grasp that number? Six million dolphins have died from the brutal fishing methods by which tuna and whales are hunted. I tell you, human cruelty has no limit." I heard the story about the German patient whose unconscious switched dolphins for Jews, when I started to take an interest in the way in which the Holocaust continued to resonate in psychoanalysts' consulting rooms in Germany. A sharp ear was needed to track the echoes of the Holocaust in the inner worlds of those who were not directly involved in it as executioners or as victims.

The behavioral individual tends to be overly fond of the psychopathic aspect of his personality, which he dons as protective armor against any contact with human feelings.

The collective repression of guilt feelings that characterized postwar West German society attested to the Germans' inability to mourn: for the narcissistic, grandiose investments they made in the person of the omnipotent leader; for the hopes they pinned on the war that were shattered; and for their refusal to take responsibility for the murder and destruction that their catastrophic political choices foisted on them and on the world. They were "good Germans" who refused to accept responsibility, because they hadn't been members of the Nazi Party. In this way they absolved their conscience of collective responsibility, cultivated a voyeuristic attitude toward every political aspect of their life, and withdrew into a private, obligation-free existence.

Schools in Germany don't teach in detail all the stages of the "Final Solution," but the curriculum emphasizes the impact that civil society's indifference can have on antidemocratic processes. "We must get up off the sofa and speak out," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said earlier this month, in response to the relative equanimity with which the German public has accepted the demonstrations by the extreme right against the government's immigration policy. It's hard to imagine a minister in the Israeli government calling on citizens to get up off the sofa and demonstrate against racism. Official Israel will always build ideological bypass routes that will allow citizens to avoid dealing with racism and read history for them in one direction: as proof that as Jews, they will eternally be

the victims of racism, never its agents.

Garrison in an occupied city. Freud frequently used political images to describe the psychic mechanism and the relation of forces between the three psychic structures – the id, the ego and the superego. He likened the superego to an occupying power that forcefully suppresses the slightest sign of desire by the occupied population. The role of this complex psychic instance is to observe the ego, posit ideals for it (of which a person is also for the most part not conscious) and serve as a moral compass – a conscience.

Fear of authority and fear of the superego are the two principal sources of guilt. The superego does not distinguish between transgression and thoughts of transgression. Moreover, it operates as a fifth column in the psyche, so it's not always clear whose interests it seeks to suppress or promote. The subject's deviant wishes? The will (no less deviant) of a different, great Other? "Loss of the superego's love is a death sentence for the ego," Freud writes, and concluded that, "living means being loved by the superego."

The question of how far life's experiences affect the structure of the superego and the nature of the relations with it, is one of the most controversial issues in psychoanalytic thought. Clearly no direct relationship exists between the rigidity of the superego and traumatic experience with strict authority figures. It's also clear that disproportionate hostility is inculcated from the first moment in relations between the superego and the ego.

One of the explanations that were put forward for the disproportionate ferocity with which the conscience tends to relate to the ego, was the existence of influences external to individual history. Freud thought that the figure of the murderous primal father, which is immersed in the psyche, is projected onto the parent and creates, through identification, the most stringent judgmental instance. Subsequently, he tried to connect between the sadistic nature of the superego and the operation of the death drive from the very beginning of life.

The moral standards of the person caught up in a group can be different, for good or bad, from those internalized by him individually. In the essay "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," Freud showed that defense against guilt is one of the functions the group fulfills for its members. Historians of the Holocaust were aided by this insight when seeking to explain the readiness of "ordinary people" to obey murderous missions during the war with absolute self-persuasion.

Writs of absolution. It's difficult to answer the question of what degree of guilt is essential for individual and cultural development, and from what point guilt feelings become a barrier to the growth of an individual or of a society. There is an important distinction between guilt feelings and unconscious guilt that seeks an outlet through self-punishment of different kinds. A person, as well as a group, can fall prey to moralistic tumult in a cyclic and unexpected manner, and the question of how guilt feeling is created, and what role it plays in a person's relations with himself and with the world, will have implications for the type of therapeutic intervention that will be suitable for him.

A psychotherapist is not a confessor priest who provides writs of absolution. He appraises himself of the conditions and circumstances that caused the patient to position himself, helpless, opposite his internal judge. If the therapist understands the patient's guilt, or the inhibitions from which he suffers, as deriving from the existence of a pathologically abusive su-

perego – it is natural that he will aspire to "liberate" the patient from the judgmental psychic tribunal that has lurched out of control. It's desirable that not everything in the psyche be justiciable, and in some cases it's better for a person to strive to preserve his sovereignty even if the superego opposes him.

At the same time, a therapist who knows the importance that accrues to guilt for psychic growth and for emotional development, will not be in a hurry to "cleanse"

his patients of guilt so they "will feel good with themselves." He will encourage them to identify the intimate grammar of their guilt feelings and the circumstances of their formation in the past and the present. Gradually patients learn how to distinguish between guilt whose source lies in unconscious aggressive and destructive wishes, and guilt and remorse whose source is love.

In praise of feeling bad about yourself. Psychic pain, sadness and guilt are signs



Yael Bogen

of life, not symptoms of illness. The ability to bear guilt is a condition for accepting "facts of life" such as the dependence human beings have on the good object. The term "depressive position," coined by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, describes a mental form of functioning that recognizes that love and hate accord their possessors not only pleasure but also intense sorrow. From the depressive position, the psyche becomes more open to a guilty conscience, which is not identical to the blind persecutory guilt whose source resides in the superego.

Persecutory guilt is characterized by resentment, despair, fear and self-flagellation. We find it, for example, in paranoia and in melancholic depression. Because of it, a person will be unable to walk around without feeling that he must bring every unfor-

tunate cat he encounters into his home. The house is small and full of cats, and the guilt does not let go. Unlike persecutory guilt, a guilty conscience manifests as sorrow, caring and responsibility toward the other and toward oneself. It may not impel a person to adopt all the stray cats in the neighborhood, but it will encourage him to take responsibility even for things over which he does not have complete control.

Guilt and democracy. A woman – a jurist by profession – relates that she is considering the possibility of doing vocational retraining to become a psychoanalyst. "I have despaired," she says. "I've been active in the public arena for many years, but nothing comes of it. Israeli democracy is collapsing. It seems to me that there are

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